A Note From the Editor

Creative License is an award winning literary and arts magazine published annually by and for the students of Georgia Perimeter College. Its mission is to provide an outlet for students’ creative expression and to serve as a classroom teaching tool to promote learning and unity among the various campuses and centers of the college.

The goal of Creative License is to expose the unique perspectives of Georgia Perimeter College students and their surrounding communities. The magazine is solely compiled of student work, and it is our belief that diverse pieces reflect the college’s unique and varied population.

We are proud of what our students have done in the past, and we hope to continue this tradition of excellence in the future.

Deborah Byrd
Faculty Editor

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Rob Watts, Interim President
In 2012, *Creative License* celebrated the 20th anniversary of its founding by dedicating the edition to founder, Dr. Rosemary Cox, and naming the four categories of prizes in her honor. This year the magazine celebrates the 20th anniversary of its first publication, so with great honor the faculty and student editors dedicate this 2013 edition of *Creative License* to Carole Creekmore, the first Faculty Editor.

In 1993, Professor Creekmore was the natural choice for Faculty Editor. Not only was she a published poet herself, but her article, “Creative Planning = Creative Teaching: A Visual Charting of Innovative Classroom Activities” was being published by the National Conference on College Teaching and Learning.

“Carole was completely dedicated to the growth and development of *Creative License*,” says Dr. Alan Jackson, also a former Faculty Editor. “She set high standards for the quality of submissions and expected sincere effort from the faculty advisors and the student editors.”

For 13 years, Professor Creekmore navigated *Creative License* through the unpredictable changes in college administration, the publishing industry, technology, funding, and even changes in the very definition of creativity. Her effort and example charted the course for others to follow. Thank you, Carole. It is with sincere appreciation that we dedicate this 20th edition of *Creative License* to you.
For Art
“The Giving Tree” by Candice McKinley, page 10

For Short Fiction
“The Birth of Venus” by Erika Kim Phu Nguyen, page 24

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Pla-ploop, pop, pop, bloop, bloop… the coffee percolator sings.
Sssst, pop, pop, ssst the bacon sizzles a hot reply.
Hot sticky cheese bubbles over the sides of the toast.
Buttery grits pop and boil.
Country music singers wailin’ and bemoanin’ love, life, and country livin’
drift from the kitchen radio to upstairs rooms.
Grandpa taps the tips of his shiny black shoes.
I rush to get the homemade peach and strawberry preserves from the pantry,
and grandpa’s favorite coffee cup.
First I blow, then sip the spicy and fragrant sassafras tea that Grandpa makes just for me.

Grandpa sleeps downstairs to protect his house—no one was “comin’ in heh” he’d say. “My family’s gonna be safe heh.”
In the South’s cotton fields, beautiful, white blossoms transform, turning crimson,
like the sharp cuts that the bracts made on my grandfather’s hands when he pulled the fluffy white balls of cotton.
Sun high and hot, he wiped a drop of blood from his fingers and drops of sweat from his brow.
“Crops gotta be picked.”
Acrid smells of stifling Northern steel mills replaced those fields.
Steel splattered crimson, sharp edges, massive machines, maiming, mangling fingers.
Somehow I never missed them when I grasped his strong and gentle hands.

I run to his room and sit in his comfy chair
Noxzema, Spearmint, and Juicy Fruit, Old-Spice and Ben Gay live in the air,
Envelop me like the crocheted throw on the back of the chair.
I smear the silvery white Noxzema on my cheeks and over my whole face.
I smell and look just like Grandpa; reflecting his warm caramel colored eyes, and smooth pecan tan cheeks.

His mammoth, circular mirror reflects his life: me, his Farmer’s Almanac, worn Bible near his alarm clock.
His footlocker at the foot of his bed holds his perfectly lined shoes, his shoe polish kit, and an old checkerboard.
I tear out of the back door, jumping down the steps, to help Grandpa in his garden. It isn’t a chore, but a treat. Grandpa is out back, making sure his transistor radio is loud enough to hear “his” Cleveland Indians baseball game. I step past perfectly round cabbages and collards tall and deep green in the backyard near the pear tree. I see Grandpa pulling spring onions and beets. Long, cool cucumbers, okra and plump, sweet tomatoes, nestled in his basket, where I place spearmint that I pulled for his sweet tea. Quietly, expertly, coaxing the earth to yield to his touch, he loosens dirt around the plant roots, and I sprinkle them with water from my tin pail. Regal morning glories boldly scale up the side of the garage, spilling over the back fence into the neighbor’s yard. Marigolds jiggle their bright golden heads in between herbs: thyme, red clover, chives, garlic and a bush of rosemary.

Wherever there is dirt Grandpa plants something good.

A patch of strawberries lines the thin path along the driveway, and suddenly we are in the front yard. Plastic ducks border the stairs up to the front porch, filled with scarlet geraniums, black-eyed susans, and burgundy sun coleus. Fragrant honeysuckle vines intertwine with the fruit heavy, sweet concord grape vines, I appear, from the cool shady side of the house, scratching around my mouth, embarrassed through the grape vines, Grandpa laughs, seeing purple blotches of concord on my fingers and face.

The radio sputters and crackles the national anthem. We put the tools in the garage and head for the large green porch swing. The game has started; he looks off into the sky. I suppose he is watching the game in his mind’s eye. C-r-a-c-k-k-k of a hit from an Indians bat, my arm around his neck, His face crinkles into a loving smile.

He takes his white handkerchief and holds it under the water spigot wiping the sweet purple tint off my sun bronzed face. We sit on the swing and he pulls his pearl handled pocket knife out and very carefully cuts a piece of sugar cane, and shares its sweetness with me.
Singing Annie’s “Tomorrow”

by Tatiana Cadet

In the pitch dark,
I stand alone
center-stage.
Taking deep breaths
as I recite the lines to myself
over and over again,
like a scratched CD stumbling
on the chorus. I close my eyes
savoring the darkness as the curtains
spread apart, like the doors of an elevator.
The beaming light hovers over me as the music begins to play.
Avoiding the staring iris of the spotlight, I close my eyes,
then allow myself to peek at the hundreds of people
fidgeting and whispering
but all I can see are the silhouettes.
Instead of trying to make out the owners of the shadows
I stare at the glowing red exit sign beaming brightly
in the back of the room.
Another deep-breath and I bellow before the crowd
announcing that the sun will come out tomorrow.
The words strum my throat
And resonate to the ears of every audience member.
I skip across the stage with Sandy’s leash in my hand,
As the red curls of my wig bob along.
I end the song on a ‘C note’
And the thunderous applause cues me to take a bow.
The curtains close like the doors of an elevator,
I close my eyes and exhale deeply.
Standing there in the dark,
center stage.
Flowers, by Amanda Anderson
Today I got an F
by Steve Keller

I ignored
I left early
I kept on driving
I didn’t say excuse me,
bless you, please, or thank you
I left the seat up
I didn’t call back
I haven’t exercised
I left the dishes dirty
I haven’t
I couldn’t
I wouldn’t
I hadn’t
I didn’t
I should have
I could have
I would have
Instead
Today I got an F.

Upon a Mighty Giraffe
by Miranda Hagans

The sky bleeds vermillion hues
Mending with purple, opals and aquamarines.
The wispy clouds stretched out
And a cool ocean breeze dances on my skin.
As I ride upon a mighty giraffe,
    round and round.
The late summer sun slowly fades away
The roar of roller coasters blends with the squeals
    of pure happiness.
In all my two years, this is it,
That moment of complete bliss.
Found hiding in the corners of Orange Beach,
Revealed through a mesmerizing carousel ride.
I was once that small smiling little girl.
Hair tousled by the wind
    and sunshine beaming from my eyes.
Now those are the only found memories.
Captured in photos and hidden away,
    like that happiness I once knew so well.
PIÑATA GIRL  
by Chachee Valentine

This is our masquerade.
You
visitor
are the uninvited.
We are dead in here.
Your white knuckles disturb the entrance door.
Our lives resonate slow motion in turtle back ears
Gregorian chant for the unsound.
From the cathedral ceiling in the smoking room
hangs a dead girl
disguised as a piñata
where lungs submerge
in institution issued
chicory cigarettes
of the rat tail kind.
Three legged table
wobbles bravely in the corner
offering cans of liquid cheese
dates expired
adding zing to unsalted crackers
devoured party wafers.
Stoned on fruit punch spiked with Stelazine
through my opaque mask
I watch Piñata Girl’s body sway
sway softly
wildly
crazy as a stray hair.
Ruptured vessels surface
over her anemic face in bloom
confetti twinkles
between the slits of her eyes
as Piñata Girl cracks a wink at me.

Dressed as paper dolls
in paper gowns
we hang from lopsided shoulders
dangle and turn as mobiles do
harmonize identical frequency
as we become the dark.
We dance like bumper cars
nibble on party favors
pretend to be having a good time
because we do not know any different
and because time
is all we have.
Someone hands me a stick for my turn.
To the beat of white knuckle bass
on the entrance door that will not go away
I beat Piñata Girl
as everyone witnesses her kamikaze sunrise
for the last time -
how with every strike to stuffed flesh
the girl’s insides burn into delicate stars
disappear before they hit ground.
Before the Keys unlatch heavy metal doors
rush in their tired miracles
I hear her favorite music taken with her.
Being the dead we know we are
we savor as much as we can
frenzy to gather her parts
before the Keys play God -
drug induce a revival for Piñata Girl
leaving us behind.
My mouth packed with sugar drops
I find my way into the lounge
turn on Saturday morning cartoons
because they feel
like home.
Do not lose heart, Beloved.
The Giving Tree, by Candice McKinley
Ouch, I say, trying not to flinch but do.

Sabrina does not look at me while she pricks me with a pin. I say it again only this time I whine.

Ouch.

Sabrina drives the pin deeper beneath my skin to let me know I should know better. Of the three of us, Kimberly, Haddie, and me, I am the only one Sabrina wants to use for the healing. When we see the others tomorrow I will feel like the devil because they don’t know how close me and Sabrina have become.

The bathroom is starting to smell like Sabrina. Without her seeing, I hold my breath for as long as I can. I stare at her mouth, watch it pucker with concentration for every first prick. Sabrina looks icy and unforgiving, borrowing the sharpened eyebrows of Vincent Price, Tales of Horror.

Beads of sweat collect and shimmer over her top lip as if she doesn’t see me, like I’m not here. During the healing, I turn into something or someone Sabrina doesn’t want to remember: a slap, scream, or maybe a hand. She can’t help it, and I feel sorry for her. I want to feel a part of something, so I let her use my body to make it all go away, for the anger in her eyes to disappear, and for mother to be healed.

Every pinprick makes me go into my mind, into that place of nothingness we are in before we are born, before we become human. When I was little, I used to ask mother what it was like to be dead.

It’s like nothing!

Mother yelled out those words one day and I knew she felt terrible for shouting. After that, every night in bed I would practice being dead by closing my eyes and holding my breath. My heart would slow, but the heavy thumping in my chest would distract me like a melody I wanted to hum. My feet, my legs, then my hips, would start to rock to the rhythm, and I would give up trying to be dead.

But, I was much younger then. It wasn’t until I met Sabrina that I figured death out. When I’m alone with Sabrina, I go into an empty place, an unfenced vault of darkness. I’ve learned that when we die there is no spiral luminescence, no warm hands welcoming, and no expecting Maker hovering. As she pricks me with mother’s pins I am in this place right now, back and forth between the slick of the pin going in and the ending mother had told me about fears of emptiness. I want to tell mother I understand death as the place of nothing, but no one talks about dying in my house. Even Sabrina obeys this rule.

The pins we use for the healing have red plastic tips that remind me of cinnamon Red Hots. These belong to mother. They are the same pins she once used to pin me a new dress for the Christmas pageant. Sabrina says they work best for the healing. Before her sickness, mother made everything. Standing on her sewing table felt like a stage, and one time I told her in my best voice how beautiful she looked in the light.

Oh, Gertrude, she said with a sweet tsk before calling me silly.

Another pin sinks in.

Nice and steady says Sabrina.

The sting helps me to not think of mother.

Don’t cry.

I sing to myself in my mind’s mind and begin to think about my marble collection and wonder where my favorite marble
could be. It was clean, smooth, and white with orange swirls through it, like a creamsicle.

The air in the bathroom is warm and sticky like honey. It doesn’t seem to bother Sabrina like it does me. Sweating reminds me of mother’s husband, Ray. Fluttering of his sweaty drunken body filleted on the couch flood my memory. I don’t want to see him anymore, and squeeze my eyes.

Sabrina, I gotta pee.

She lets me stand up, flips up the lid as I push down my pants, my underwear, and there it is: WEDNESDAY. My heart beats in my ears. I have on the wrong day’s underwear. It’s Friday, and if Sabrina sees I’m wearing Wednesday she’ll call me stupid. She might not do the healing anymore, and we’re running out of time. Hoping he can hear me, I make a deal with God in my head that if he will let this slide, I promise to spend more time with mother before it’s too late.

When I finish peeing, Sabrina grabs me under my left armpit. Her hand sticks to my skin, and my salt and her salt mix and burn. She doesn’t see Wednesday.

Thank you, God.

Before I zip my pants, the healing continues.

Ouch. Can’t we move on to another spot? I ask this out loud. Half a smile leaks out the corner of my mouth because blood makes me nervous.

Sit still, you baby.

She thrusts the pin into my arm.

You want this to work or not?

I don’t reply. I squirm, and squirming is just as bad. With her finger on the red tip, she moves the pin round and round, making tiny circles. Her pale blue eyes squint at my eyes that are brownish-yellow, like poop-tank water, she always says. Time is running out.

Sit still, her voice commands.

The room smells like Sabrina. Like cooked corn.
Meditations to Escape from Anxiety #2, by Candice McKinley
Nine months insignificant -
gray matter defines the canyon
between us.
My language waits to be named
to unload a double barrel chamber
packed with muted vowels
until you fire.
Finger, Finger
I think of the rings around your bones -
for thirty-eight years
I have belonged to you
and to a desire
to roll my sleeve
pull the trigger
feel the innocence
of blushing freedom.
Never would I hear the sound
that kind of dream sound
the one that makes you crash
into your pillow
echoes through you against the night
because the sound and the nothingness
happen together.
Sulfuric smell
of black-blue powder make me sleep –
stains my left palm
leaves a carbon print of my existence.

Radio to Me
by Chachee Valentine

Though I may be found
who will remember me -
I am not dead
I am not living -
One-one thousand
two-one thousand
three -
as voices count
I swim with sparkle fish
in the underwater sun
paddle through mists of hair
hairs that trace a path
connect my disabled vertebra.
Someone on shore holds a piece of me
to their ear
imagines the sea.
Sandpaper teeth grind a melody
transistor crackles radio to me
between the scissor current
and the passion of a wave.
Thick with sleep
I try to wake for counting voices
fading
surrendering their numbers to land
that do not come back.
Beyond myself on a raft
I float
abandoning a memory
of me and Finger
extinct.
My father who loved me 
and mother who did not
sat their heads side by side
in the car that rolled its wheels
to the clinic
where my body sat for years.
All I wanted revealed itself
through a passenger window
at the end of a long drive.
Elongated roads swerved past trees
swaying hula
round and round
waving farewell
to the outside.
To create my only witness -
nervous fingers pinched on skin -
sometimes the fingers felt like mine
other pinches put me to sleep.
The clinic closed in -
make this a dream I dreamed -
turn me into a dream I dreamed more.
The doctor with his brush fire beard
signaled his white nylon nurse
to show my body its bed.
Buried in the grave of the dream
I wrestle against the seasons.
Caught in the snare I walk
incomplete.
And since I am the dream
who dreams the center cut
even my bed had left the clinic
seeking more than a body
a place where everything is real life
without me.
Our last supper -
that night I leapt for the cupboard
right hand landed on the stove.
Electric coil hissed -
burned October colors
palm dried into book-pressed leaf.

Not one mouth warned timber
or gave thanks
as I lost my childhood
to The Fall.
Trunk rotten
shadow disappeared
my mother stiff as bark
never moved.
I have been the nightmare -
the monster under their bed.
I am the reoccurring dream
that will not go away.
To save myself
trees made me dream.
To hide myself
memories turned mulch
protected the soil of my mind.
Remember me -
not as graceful as your miscarried Hope
might have been.
Remember me as those sweet trees
how they move to pass time
sigh in the breeze
stretch their spines
sing lullabies to seedlings
below.
But this story I am told
is fishbowl memory found in the sludge
after diagnosis.
Like a good patient
I breathe in the quickness
of the needle’s fury
and lie down with the dogs.
My father who loved me
and mother who did not
sat their heads side by side
in the car that rolled its wheels
away from the clinic
where my body sat for years.
Dreaming with hula trees
swaying to pass time.

Horsham

by Chachee Valentine
Bahamian Sunset, by Sheena Vasquez

St. Louis, by Trey Larenz Earl
Jai Kali Maa, by Eduardo A. Cintron
Untitled, by Detras Heyward
Quilt of Grandma, *by An Artist of Many Names*

Friend, *by Trey Larenz Earl*
The Giving Tree

*by Candice McKinley*

A consequence of self-doubt.

For every betrayal to the nature of a tree,
a leaf was broken by the wind.
In this way, she gave of herself.

A piece of protective bark shed
each time she held back in silence,
giving way to his judgment of her.
But for every scale fallen, the victory was hers in silence,
for in silence the Wind carried away a heavy burden.

He stripped her naked and green,
so she could feel the authenticity of herself.
Feel her open heart, take it out, and give it to him.
He needed it, her love, to heal his heart.

And when the Wind blew, too heavy with knowledge,
he heard a branch break and ran for safety.
She stayed, because she could not follow,
and carved a message for him if he should return
and her limbs be too heavy to embrace him:

"Do not lose heart, Beloved.
Take mine. It will grow back."

A hollow oak tree feels for the remaining water beneath her,
heavy limbs reach out in longing.
Her leaves, once electric with the dawn of spring,
have been swept away.
As the earth cools
and the sun rests
where land meets the sky,
hues of purplish blues
color the horizon.

On my quiet porch,
a quilt with a hundred colors
lies lazily over my long legs.
Stuffed soft lamb's wool
peaks through a myriad of earth-toned patches.
I am warm in the cool Georgia fall.

The burnt orange squares
near my slippered feet
remind me of the hot August sun
that turns wet brown mud pies
into hard clay cakes, cracked in the middle
and smooth around the edges.
Back when our future seemed so far away,
my brother and I were Master Chefs in our own backyard,
baking up water mixed with red Georgia clay
and talking dreamily about the world-famous Shahid bakery
we’d have when we grew up--
“Sweet Treats and Eats.”

My tiny laugh breaks the silence on the porch.

Pulling the quilt closer to my waist,
I am mesmerized by the sea green patch
the color of my son’s eyes.
They light up his fair-skinned face
like green palm trees on a sandy white beach.
He comes to me when I am alone,
asking questions about life after death,
being adopted,
and the homeless “hobos” with the cardboard signs at the highway exits.
“We should always give them money because they were in the Vietnam War.
I know, ‘cause Uncle Saddi told me.”
He is a young Prince with deep jeweled eyes.
As I smile while thinking of him,
I pull the thick heavy quilt even closer
to my chest.
Nightfall is approaching,
and I stare at the deep brown patch
in the middle of my quilt.

I squeeze it tightly,
bringing the dusty old memory
in front of my teary eyes.
I can see him clearly,
as if the sun was shining now like it was on that day.
Sitting on the ground under a huge tree
in the Twin Cities,
I nestle between his big thick legs
and feel his heart beat
through the brown skin on my back.
Leaves dance around us
celebrating a new season, as
his deep voice tells stories of his father.
He wraps his strong arms around me,
pulling me closer into his life.
I can smell the red and white peppermint melting on his tongue
as he whispers “I love You”
a dozen different ways.
His smooth brown lips tickle my earlobes
sending heat through my body as the sun never could.

Reveling in the cocoa brown heat of the square patch,
I inhale the crisp Autumn air again
and exhale slowly,
watching my warm breath float into the cool dark air.
O

verbearing. Suffocating. Annoying. Those were the words that came to mind with my mother and her trail of nagging words walking behind me in our foyer. Her voice echoed so it seemed like five mothers were talking to me.

“I told you to pack your toothbrush. Why do you always forget your toothbrush?”

That was a good question. I liked my teeth cleaned, but the toothbrush was such an easy thing to forget especially when I was using it before I left and had stuck it right back into the holder. I thought of what I was going to say next because if I answered, she would be annoyed and if I didn’t, she would be annoyed.

“I’m sorry,” I said, having decided that being apologetic under any circumstance was best. It was my go-to response for just about anything I was being berated about.

“Now I have to go buy you another one. Again. Why do I always do everything in this house?” She had a way of always volunteering to do something but then complaining about it.

My palms were up to stop her. “No, I’ll go. I’ll go.”

Most of my friends in the medical program at Northwestern went home for winter break to celebrate unity and family, not to engage in a sparring match. If it weren’t for non-instant food and cable television, I would have stayed in Illinois with my toothbrush. It might have been freezing there, but the temperature was probably warmer than my foyer.

I stood among all the toothbrushes at the corner store where I worked one summer. There weren’t many to choose from because choice was a luxury in Angel Fire, New Mexico. The population of toothbrushes to choose from was probably to scale of the population of people.

Hard, medium, pink, or green; did it really matter? I just picked one and headed for the counter.

“Jesse Spencer?” The voice from behind me prompted me to turn around. There stood Wesley Kirby. He wasn’t as tall as I remembered, but he still had the same green eyes and dirty blonde hair that seemed to lie where it may. I had a crush on him since sixth grade. I had once referred to his chin as being chiseled by the gods. We went on two dates my junior year of high school. On the second date, he asked me what I wanted out of this life that was any different from anyone else, and I didn’t have an answer for him. Two years later, I still didn’t as I stood in the middle of aisle three making small talk. How was I? Where was I going to school? What was I studying?

“Biochemistry,” I answered.

“I always thought you’d do something artsy. You always had those sketchbooks with you in high school.”

“That’s not practical,” I heard myself say.

“Says who?”

My mom, I thought but instead I said, “Everyone. You can’t make a living selling art. People are worth more when they’re dead.”
He nodded at me tentatively as if he were still deciding if he believed it.

After we said our goodbyes, I paid for my new green, medium-bristled toothbrush. I was still thinking about my answers to Wesley’s questions. I did believe myself to an extent, but there was a part of me that was still clinging onto the age-old theory of only pursuing a career I would love. Art wasn’t just something I had picked up like a game of dodgeball. It went from doodling on scraps of paper to keep me occupied at the doctor’s office to notebooks full of anything that caught my eye: birds, flowers, people in magazines for example. I gifted sketches of my friends for Christmas when I ran out of ideas and money.

I paused at the soccer field as I walked to the car from the convenience store. I watched as the goalkeeper moved as the ball came toward the net. I had wanted to play soccer as a child but “girls don’t play soccer,” my mom had said. She was a Rolodex full of excuses as to why and why not. “Girl Scouts is too much time and effort,” and “dance is too expensive if you’re not even good at it.” Nothing would fly into the metaphorical goal.

Soccer, of course, was never a real ambition for me. It was just one of many things I regretted not getting to experience. It was too late now considering I had the athletic ability of an incapacitated chimpanzee. But soccer, Girl Scouts, and dance – just like art – were hobbies to my mother. I stopped voicing anything that didn’t have to do with neurology to her so art was never even an option.

“Your brother called,” was the first thing my mom said to me when I met her downstairs the next morning. “He’s come into some money. Thinks stained glass is his new calling.”

Yes, and so was farm work, and surf lessons, and horse-back riding, and a girl named Elaine. My brother, Jackson, for all intents and purposes, was a great person but made extremely poor decisions like devoting all of his time into The Next Big Thing, or as my mother phrased it, “The Next Big Failure.” She couldn’t rope him in, so she gave up on it a long time ago. He was the antithesis of everything she was. She was young when she had him and had given up on all her dreams of being a neurosurgeon to make it work with my dad. I was the result of an effort to salvage a marriage already in shambles seven years later. Lesson learned: a baby does not create a marriage and it doesn’t fix it either.

“Your mom was going places,” people would tell me for the umpteenth at weddings … Christmas parties … as I got my hair cut. Angel Fire was a ridiculously small town where somebody’s business was everybody’s business. When the topic of how I was doing came up, so did the topic of my mom. She graduated at the top of her class and was attending the University of Colorado Denver before she met my dad and fell pregnant.

Our father left when I was five and Jackson was twelve. A year later, my parents were officially divorced. I remembered feeling sad that my parents weren’t together anymore, but the sadness was replaced with feeling apathetic. At first, he was living across
town so we got to see him on the weekends but then he moved to Portland. Jackson refused to keep in contact with him after he figured he wasn’t coming home, but I call him every once in a while to see how he was doing without us. He was fine. We always make plans for me to see him in Portland but our words never come to fruition.

I was eleven when Jackson decided that college was a waste of time, effort, and he wasn’t good at it. It was also around the same time that my mom started to thrust her hopes and dreams on me because I was all she had left. I was never quite sure if I was supposed to hate him for leaving me alone with her or if I was just jealous that he got to do whatever he wanted.

Every time Jackson called from wherever he was at the moment – South Carolina, California! Georgia or maybe it was Alabama – it was because he had some new bright business venture. I had stopped asking where he was, and started asking how he was.

“At least he’s alive,” I repeated like I did every time there was news about his new calling, before taking out a container of orange juice and pouring myself a healthy amount. What I had wanted to say was, At least he’s doing something he likes.

My mom hummed in neither disagreement nor agreement as she put her Kiss me, I’m Irish mug in the sink. We weren’t Irish. My parents were both second-generation Italian immigrants, which meant we had dark hair, dark eyes, and everything we ate went to our butts (at least in the case of the females).

Her dark brown eyes were no different than mine but I felt like she saw the world differently. Where she saw frivolity, I saw choices. Where she saw a waste of time, I saw exploration. She turned toward me and there was a look of determination on her face, but it was gone as soon as I blinked. It was the look she wore whenever she wanted to say something but thought otherwise of it.

Instead, she said, “Don’t forget to bring in the mail.” I nodded as she picked up her keys.

When my mom returned from work at the local antique store she managed, I had finished seasons four and five of Friday Night Lights, and was currently in the middle of organizing my bookshelf. Though I lived in a dorm at Northwestern, I kept most of my material possessions at home.

It occurred to me that I had accumulated a large number of magazine subscriptions that had nothing to do with my interests. Brides, Maxim, Forbes, and Southern Living were among them. In my free time, I had ended up looking up free subscriptions and hoarding them.

As I was pulling out one of my many magazines to toss away, a notebook fell to the floor. I bent down and picked it up. I had first thought it was a sketchbook and my heart quickened. I hadn’t drawn even a stick figure in so long. To my relief, it was just a journal of random thoughts. I thumbed through it and stared at a page in the middle. “Predictions” was scrawled across the top in my loopy handwriting. I had stopped asking where he was, and started asking how he was.

“I was never quite sure if I was supposed to hate him for leaving me alone with her or if I was just jealous that he got to do whatever he wanted.”
form, but I had given up on that idea when he moved away. Then, it became less significant over time to follow the tradition of writing the predictions because I had stopped making goals for myself and had let my mom do it instead.

I started to read the predictions dated for when I was eleven. The first few were always the same vain ideas.

Number one: I will have the cutest clothes this year.

Two: I will get lots of presents for my birthday.

Three: Jonas Brothers concert!!!

Four: Mom will let me wear makeup.

Number five was, “Wesley Kirby will finally kiss me” – half true. It was more like a peck.

Six: Friends will be un-canceled.

Number seven read, “I will own a gallery when I’m older.” I always wrote the most important one down on seven because seven was supposed to be a lucky number. Some luck I had. I stared at seven and tried to suppress the knots forming in my stomach. I thought back to Wesley and it was like numbers five and seven were mocking me.

“Dinner!” My mom called from downstairs, cutting through my thoughts. I stood there for a moment. I closed the notebook quickly, not wanting to think about it anymore, and shoved it back onto the shelf. That was enough for tonight. I wasn’t sure how much more of these trips down memory lane I could handle.

“Dinner!” She said louder this time as if the volume of her shrieks were directly proportional to how fast I was going to move. She was mid-yell when I started coming down the stairs.

“Coming,” I said, stating the obvious but she was already down the hall.

Outside of our “fights” – or rather, her nagging and my cowering to avoid confrontation with her – my relationship with my mom wasn’t entirely bad. She used to send me care packages full of things I didn’t really need. She had bought me so many razors I was beginning to think she thought I was Sasquatch. It was the thought that counted or something of the sort.

We were talking about how glad I was to escape the snow up north halfway through dinner when the doorbell rang. My mom grumbled about it being late, and rude, and “if it was Anna from next-door asking about someone stealing her tulips again, don’t open the door.”

I heard my mother’s chair make a scraping sound against the linoleum floor.

It had to be some trick, but sure enough, when I opened the door, his unmistakable grin was smiling back at me. Since when did his teeth get so white? I noticed he had a tan. Probably got it from South Cali-geor-bama, or wherever he was when he decided that New Mexico was the happening place to be now.

“Little sis!” He exclaimed.

“What are you doing here?” Our mother said from behind me, saying exactly what I was thinking but five tones icier. I could feel another fight between them before he even stepped through the door.

“Hi to you both, too.”

“We’re having dinner,” I said quickly trying to avoid a world war.

“Good. I’m starving,” he said. He was taking off his shoes and my mom had a look of disapproval on her face. It might have been the hair. He was blonde now, but his roots were grown out so much that he might as well have been a brunette. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was busy or just another sign of his rebellion. It might have been the weird smell of … something. Did they have showers in South Cali-geor-bama? Watering holes, even? More than likely, it was probably just him being there unannounced. She didn’t do well with surprises. As for me, I welcomed his presence because I hadn’t seen him in
years, but at the same time, I knew this wasn’t going to end well. The last time he came home, they spent the entire time arguing about college.

Dinner suddenly became a spectacle to me. Jackson still had an insatiable appetite for my mom’s crappy but edible cooking. It was one of the endearing qualities about him – he could eat whatever was laid out in front of him like the one time he ate three-week-old pizza, and swore up and down it was okay. Tonight, it was a casserole. I’m not sure what ingredients were put into making it, but calling it a casserole was a safe bet. Though he didn’t say anything about the dish, he was already on his fifth full plate while I was still pushing around the string beans on my first.

“So then, I thought ... stained glass is going to be a huge market in New Mexico. We could build like, a million churches,” he continued to fill us on his life through mouths full of food.

At least I feigned interest. I could tell my mom had stopped listening a long time ago. I figured it was somewhere between mountain climbing with Elaine and finding out she was married. It was always the same story with different names and places.

“That’s stupid,” my mom said across from him suddenly. I looked at her with Bugs Bunny bulging eyes. We both knew how flippanant my brother could be, but never voiced it before now.

“No it’s not,” he said.

“You’ve been wasting seven years doing God knows what and you come back for stained glass?” My head was going back and forth like I was watching a match between Andy Roddick and Kevin Federer, not sure who was going to win. I could hear years of her discontent smack him in the face like a tennis ball.

“And what am I supposed to do? Be like Jess? Do whatever you want?”

My mom didn’t say anything, which was very unlike her.

“Do you ever ask Jesse what she wants? If you ever took a chance to notice your own daughter, you’d know she’s a really good artist, Mom.”

I stared at him. “Stop.” I placed a hand on his shoulder to emphasize my point. Keep me out of this, I thought. You don’t understand. No one did. Not Wesley, not Jackson, and not my mom. Maybe not even me.

“You’re going to push her away like you did Dad and me, and you’re going to end up alone in this big house with your neurosurgeon dreams and your neurosurgeon disappointments.”

“Jackson! That’s enough,” I said sternly, but my mom was already out of her seat, leaving her dinner half eaten.

“You took it too far.”

“I folded my arms across my chest. “You didn’t have to finish it.”

“She brainwashed you.” He moved toward me to place a hand on my forehead as if he could feel my supposed mental illness like a cold. I stepped back to avoid his touch.

“Stop. Grow up, Jax. She’s not the enemy. You’re a twenty-five year old man who can’t keep a job, a girl, or a proper haircut.”

“Why are you protecting her?”

“Why are you trying to hurt her? ... She’s our mom.”

I went to find my mom and he followed me, or so I thought until he took his suitcase and turned the other way to his old bedroom.

I watched him angrily wheel his stuff down the corridor. One of the wheels of his suitcase was loose so the entire thing wobbled as he pulled it. He looked like a child with a broken toy. He didn’t get his way and threw a tantrum. He was still the same kid who had convinced me that a mole was just a fly’s poop. I had always admired him for his ability to do as he pleased. I had mistaken carelessness for strength, independence, and spontaneity. Jackson wasn’t any of those things. Instead of doing whatever our mother wanted, he was letting her
control him by doing what she didn’t want. I didn’t quite und-erstand until now that I had sacrificed what I had wanted to please my mother, just like she had given up on her dreams for a family. It was a strange feel-ing to have knowing that I was the only one who had grown in this household.

I slowly pushed open the door to the upstairs bathroom, afraid of the creaks and moans that often gave away an unwelcomed guest. My mom was sitting on the floor, staring up at the wall. Her face was streaked with tears. I turned to what she was looking at. Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* looked back at me. Mom had bought it at a yard sale because it was her favorite painting. It was also mine because of its soft-ness, colors, symmetry and the story of Venus – born from the sea in a seashell and clothed by Horae as she was blown to the shore. When it came to my-mythology, I had always identified more with Persephone. Hades abducted Persephone because he had fallen in love with her, only returning her to her mother after tricking her into eating pomegranate seeds. Whoever ate food from the Underworld was damned to spend eternity there – trapped, married to something she didn’t love.

As much as I loved my mom, I didn’t want to be like her. That was what I wanted in life. I didn’t want to be stuck in my own personal hell.

My mom didn’t move, but I knew she knew I was there. I closed the door behind me and sat down next to her.

“He’s unpacking in the guest bedroom,” I said, brac-king myself for a post-Jackson explosion.

“Okay,” she said in a soft voice I wasn’t used to.

“Okay,” I repeated. As I sat and stared with her, I realized … I wasn’t Persephone. Jackson and I were the pomegranate seeds that sealed her fate.

I made a mental note to call Wesley for that third date because I finally had an answer to that question he asked me all those years ago.
Bottled, by Janita Mikkola
Anne drives.
Right foot presses the gas pedal hard
hard as a pair of ruby lips smashed
on red wine stained chin
bleached out collar.
I sit behind.
Blackberry vinyl resin sticks to hairless legs
holds me stiff as a cross
as she weaves her nineteen-sixty-seven
crimson Cougar in and out of cars
yielding to her yellow roar.
Anne’s tongue
laps up virginity until it is dry.
I want to be her kind.

Red dress wears her femaleness
the way a thin line draws a silhouette
and not a child or a woman
ambiguous and shapeless
I see words as words
inscribed in my body’s mind.
The rev-rev of her liquid laughter
turns high beams on high
mixes with the air
excavates sound from my lungs.
Inside a voice surfaces
begs for me to slip on the costume
of brave Anne
still haunted.
Her marble eyes grow greener.
Anne tells me
I must learn to create my own room
my own audience
muster every chalk of my body
to let the words find me
until nothing is left but my sex
or the opposite of the poem
as big as we are small
will hide its seeds
remain in the gravedigger’s pocket.

Crimson Cougar halts at the Ritz.
We sneak inside
order martinis
stingers
two-for-one and knock them back.
Poets dressed as salesmen
waiters
homemakers
surround me
cat strut the isle.
The podium is taller than I remember.
Words crumble in my mouth
fractured bone letters fall
ash silent.

Anne waves.
Tosses my pages into the choked up air.
I have not done my hitch
my half.
Part of the road I am asphalt
not whole.
Back in the Cougar
the seat rubs under my thighs
shame fills the blanks inside.
Salty smoke swirls
around Anne
as she cures herself for the first
and last time.
To fill Anne’s dress I must grow
so I burn
burn to render the madness.
I want to be her kind.

Drive
by Chachee Valentine
Mystery in a Glare, by Ciara Seabolt
The Violin Player

by Candice McKinley

A stage of strings and bows invites us in for a bluegrass song.
Dobro, cello, guitar, mandolin, banjo and violin.

My lover approaches as the music begins, to stand close behind me.
We touch; he, my neck, and my fingers run the length of his thigh.
He does not know this awakens my soul,
he hasn’t the pleasure of my company.
But I feel his fingers dance on my pale skin,
as the musician’s vibrate across his banjo.

This sweet, grassy blue music is my lover’s call, his song of lamentation.
He speaks softly, but I feel him howling at me, his moon,
“Come, and run wild with me.
Come, and stand on your feet.
Come down from there and fill me with the wisdom you know.”

Our mouths, as far apart today as the horizon,
now as close as the microphone and her songbird’s light kiss.
And as this heavy melody fills the room
we enfold, neck to neck, listening for words unsaid.

…. (violin music)

We are inside of this song,
the ancient hunger in me lulled to peaceful sleep,
Love rocking her gently.
Longing takes hold of my hand and hip,
swaying us all to the rhythm the strings make.
This rocking and swaying creates tension,
the sensual rolling each hip makes, pregnant with wanting.
Now, God embraces me, and I can no longer feel the boundary between He, my lover, and I. There is only Love and Violin. He speaks through the song, “You must let go now,” and I willfully whisper “No,” though no one can hear this small voice, all lost in a sea of good vibrations. He whispers back, “Take my hand and do not fear, I will never leave you, but you will hear me only so long as the violin sings its song.”

Play foolishly then, with absent pause or the strings will no longer bring the transcendence of His touch, the musician’s passionate taps on his guitar like my lovers just below my back. My wrinkled brow gives way to a breaking smile.

...(violin music)

And as this hymn comes to an end, an inspirited sigh escapes me, unnoticed and inaudible. I am alone again in the ocean.

My lover once said he wanted someone to sing with him songs of devotion. Burn this sweet, southern music, then, into the hearts of men.
Faculty Editor: Deborah Byrd

Faculty Advisors:
Phil Mosier
Rick Diguette
Shellie Sims Welch
Katherine Perry
Tracienne Ravita
Amber Nicole Brooks

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